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ABSTRACT

The document presents a portion of a paper by Raja Roy Singh, Director, Regional Office for Education in Asia, entitled "Regional Education Programmes: Asia", which was presented at a regional seminar convened by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, in July 1975. There are at least two notable features of the implanation of the modern system of education in Asia. First it has occurred in all Asian countries and not only those which fell to colonial powers. Secondary, in a relatively short time it supplanted totally the indigenous forms of education. The process of education became really the process of identifying the elect. By mid-60s it could be claimed with justification that though the developing countries of Asia were to be found at varying stages of educational development, every country had achieved a formally organized education system covering all levels from the primary to higher and encompassing general, technical, and professional types of education. Traditionally education systems are found in close alliance with inequalities and with the perpetuation of privileges. The cognitive model on which much of the content of education is based does not adequately meet the educational needs of developing countries. (Author/LH)

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EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS IN THE ASIAN REGION

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EDUCATIONAL CONCERNS IN THE ASIAN REGION

By Asian region I mean* that vast area which nearly four thousand years of history has left undefined even while etching out its rich diversities, particularities and unique features. History diversifies; and it has diversified Asia in full measure. Within this region are to be found highly industrialised countries which are face to face with their future, and also countries, developing and aspiring, which are face to face with their past; countries of continental size and small countries; multi-racial/multi-language countries as well as countries which are socially homogeneous. The diversity is endless.

Is it then possible to make any generalization which hold across these diversities? I believe it is possible. Firstly, there are the historical factors; some of them are common, others are interlinked. Secondly, there are social and economic forces which in one form or another manifest themselves in all countries at certain stages of development. Thirdly, there are common factors which are discernible in the problems and the aspirations which countries at similar stages of development are faced with.

In education, the most important landmark in the history of the region was the adoption in the countries of what is referred to (more in the interest of convenience rather than of precision) as the 'modern system of education' as it evolved in Europe and America in the nineteenth century. Before the introduction of the 'modern system', almost all countries in Asia had their indigenous forms of education derived from the great religious and ethical philosophies whose sway held beyond national boundaries—Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam. These indigenous forms of education were by no means just expressions of incidental learning. They embodied a design, a philosophy, a view of man and society.

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*The thinking growing rapidly in our country about dead-ends and dead-locks in education, as well as about new ways and alternatives to be searched for and investigated would gain in depth and efficacy by being seen also in an international perspective and from a larger standpoint. The text published here—written by Mr. Raja Roy Singh, Director, Regional Office for Education in Asia in Bangkok helps in placing this debate and our national concerns in the Asian framework. The text is a portion of a paper entitled *Regional Education Programmes: Asia* presented to a Regional Seminar on 'Learning to be' convened by the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, at Canberra in July 1975.

There are at least two notable features of the implantation of the modern system of education in Asia. First it has occurred in all Asian countries and not only those which fell to colonial powers. Some countries started early, others later; but by the beginning of the present century, the process of implantation was well entrenched in all countries. Secondly, in a relatively short time it supplanted totally the indigenous forms of education. The displacement was so complete that only the zeal of antiquarian revivalism can discern any links between the earlier forms of education and that which displaced them. One may note further that this displacement was largely limited to education. The way of life and the system of values embodied in the Asian religions, from which the indigenous form of education had derived, continued (and for the vast majority of population, still continues) to be a dominant influence in Asian societies.

I have referred to this historical background because it is very much a part of the present scene in the developing countries of Asia.

Whatever the nature of the 'modern' system of education in the countries in which it originated, the characteristic of the forms which it took in different Asian countries are easily discernible. It is a formal, hierarchical structure divided by level/stages/cycles aad within each stage by year and grade. Progression is possible along a single track, from one grade to another, from one stage to the next higher stage till the educand emerges at the other end. Those who fall out of step in this progression are 'failures' and those who keep going are finally 'educated'. Each stage or level is a preparation for the next higher stage and acquires meaning when the next higher stage is completed.

Education in this system is a whole-time occupation over a number of years and the population in it is set apart from the population at large. The moment a pupil steps into a village school in a tin shed or into an urban school encased in cement, he steps out of the life in the village or his urban neighbourhood. By a combination of historical circumstances, this 'modern' system of education was first implanted in towns and cities and got stamped on it the values of the wages-sector of the economy.

Another characteristic of this system lies in the fact that it aims first and last at developing the theoretical mode of apprehension. Knowledge is equated with what can be apprehended by retiocination. It is a cognitive model of education. It is academic not in the original sense of being skeptical but in the sense of cloistered learning. It may well have been this characteristic more than others which evoked a ready response in the Asian countries with their traditions of speculative scholarship.

With these characteristics, education became an enterprise for the elect—those who reached the top steps of the ladder. The process of education became really the process of identifying

the elect. The system could only function if it operated as a sieving machine, selecting at every grade, every year, every level. Not surprisingly, examinations came to dominate the whole system — what was taught, how it was taught, who was taught and by whom.

I have referred to the implanted system of education as if it were the same system in all countries. Obviously this is not so. This implantation process started in different countries and in different periods. The forms it evolved varied from one country to another but the basic characteristics of these forms as they are found in the developing countries are strikingly similar — and so are the problems which have arisen from this line of evolution.

The decade following the end of the Second World War is another landmark in the development of education in the Asian countries. Countries which were under colonial domination regained their political independence and national governments in all countries addressed themselves almost simultaneously to the tasks of consolidating political freedom and loosening the stranglehold of economic and social stagnation of the preceding period. The revolution of rising expectations found expression in mounting pressures everywhere to attain as rapidly as possible the levels of economic and social well-being in the already developed countries and led to the adoption of development planning as an instrument of national policy. In no other sphere was the upsurge of aspirations so vividly reflected as in the demand for education. Two major trends are clearly discernible in the decade of the 50s. First is a massive expansion of the education systems and enrolment increases on an unprecedented scale. For example, forty million additional pupils were enrolled in the schools (and this does not include the People's Republic of China). This exceeded by a substantial margin the total increase in the rest of the world during the same period. These figures are aggregates for the whole region but are no less impressive when broken down by country with the base year around 1950. This increase, achieved against severe shortages of resources, both financial and skilled personnel, bears testimony to the governments' commitment.

The second trend in that decade was institution building. It derived in part from the way the role of education was seen in economic development. With concentration on the growth rates of GNP, the role of education as a supply source of specialized and skilled personnel was accorded priority in national development planning. In the result there was a prestigious growth of technical institutions and universities and, at the school level, efforts were directed almost exclusively to improving and modernizing the teaching of science. These developments however did help in some degree to diversify the structure of the education systems.

By mid-1960s it could be claimed with justification that though the developing countries of Asia were to be found at varying stages of educational development, every country had achieved a formally organized education system covering all the levels from the primary to the higher and encompassing general, technical and professional types of education. These systems had also developed to a stage of self-sufficiency, in the narrow sense that they had the requisite capacity to meet the manpower needs for maintaining or expanding themselves. It was no longer the case, for example, that an education system could not be expanded because there were not

enough students coming out who could be trained as teachers or because there were not training institutions or staff for training institutions. This was surely an achievement of no mean order.

This expansion and growth however took place in the main within the framework of the educational systems and structures as they had been handed down from the preceding decades. There were undoubtedly a few changes, some of them potentially quite significant (for example, the use of national languages as media of instruction), but by and large, the objectives and content of education were not challenged. There was growth but no change.

The balance sheet in the latter years of 1960s would show in credit the large number of pupils entering the education system, an increasing number of trained and qualified teachers, an impressive growth of institutions of different types and an increasingly large number of young people coming out of higher institutions with specialized qualifications. But the debit entries are also considerable and they loomed larger in the succeeding years.

We are not counting up successes and shortfalls : such accounting may even be irrelevant. The point to note is that growth without change in an implanted system cannot but run into dead-ends. It negates its own possibilities.

As the education systems expanded, their characteristic features, to which I alluded earlier, manifested themselves on an enlarged scale in the latter years of the 60s in a variety of contradictions.

Because the implanted education systems share the common characteristic in that they are single track systems, the expansion at the base resulted inevitably in inflationary expansion at the next higher levels. The system was caught in a swell of student flow which could not be guided as it increased and which increased as it could not be guided. The only exit points were for those who were pushed out — the failures, the drop-outs. In the circumstances of the developing countries, this situation had a variety of consequences.

The existing education systems depend heavily on the financial resources of the State. The available resources, limited as they were, had to be committed to meeting the demand generated by the expansionary pressures as they reached the second and then the third levels of the system. In the result the resources were diverted to the higher levels of education. The growth rate at the primary level began to decline sharply from about 5.3 per cent in the 50s to 4.3 per cent in the early 70s. In the 50s secondary level added 10 million students and this number increased to 18 million; in higher education the decennial increase was from 1.2 million to 3.1 million. Since the per unit cost at secondary level is about 5 to 8 times and at the tertiary level 10 to 15 times more than the per unit cost at the primary level, the disproportionate growth of second and third levels of education has been at the cost of the larger numbers in the primary age group. During the same period population growth rate also marked up, from about 1.3 per cent to about 2.5. It is estimated that educational facilities at the primary level would have to be increased by 50 per cent over a period of 15 years just to maintain the present austere level.

The other sector to suffer was adult education and literacy. It is typically a form of education which, more than any other forms, must grow out of, and be nourished by, the indigenous social and cultural milieu. It did not for that reason fit into the implanted education system. The forms of adult education and literacy which were associated with the indigenous modes of education became almost extinct as the modern system of education grew and took hold. For example, in the South Asian sub-continent it is estimated that about 50-60 per cent of the adult population was literate in the XVIII century; by the end of the XIX century, it had declined to less than 10 per cent. In certain South-east Asian countries where indigenous forms of adult education remain active, the level of literacy has also remained high—much higher than the level that would have been achieved by relying only on the output of the education system.

In the first post-war decade, a number of countries launched extensive programmes of adult education and literacy. The results were however short-lived as the resources needed to maintain them got diverted to the formal system of education, and relapse into illiteracy soon eroded the gains. In one large South-east Asian country, illiteracy at one time was claimed to have been virtually liquidated. A count a few years later showed that nearly 40% of those who had acquired rudimentary literacy had relapsed.

As the direct attack on the problem of illiteracy began to flag, the expectation gained ground that universal primary education which the expansion of existing education systems would provide would solve the problem at the roots. This however did not happen because universal primary education was not achieved and could not in any case be achieved without simultaneously treating the problem of widespread illiteracy. While the percentage of literacy in the region has inched up a few points, the absolute number of illiterates has also increased and continues to increase.

The combined effect of slowing down primary education and the neglect of adult education and literacy has been a denial of education to the masses. Expansion strategy failed to expand the base. The top grew at the expense at what it rested on The inherent contradiction between elitist education and mass education was brought to a sharp focus.

Though expanded, the education systems have retained their discriminatory and selective character. This is manifested in the problems of so-called drop-outs and repeaters—children generally in the first three grades who do not continue in the system. The percentage of children who drop out varies from country to country but the numbers involved are very large. For the region as a whole, they comprise almost 35-40 per cent of those who enter grade one. Who are these children ? More of them are in rural areas than in urban areas; there will be a substantial number of girls among them; most of them belong to illiterate families; all of them come from poor homes. Thus one can see that the rejection device built into the system begins to operate right from the starting point. It never stops : examinations take their toll, as much as 35-40 per cent at the end of each level; and the increasing share of education costs to be borne by the parents also selects.

The urban-based education system which is geared to the wage-sector of the economy has proved itself ill suited to the rural environment. In the first two post-war decades, the urban

bias of the education system got reinforcement from the general development policies that the governments had then adopted which concentrated on developing the modern industrial sector. 60 to 80 per cent of the population, however, in the developing countries of Asia are in the rural areas and the neglect of the rural areas soon showed itself as a drag on the economy as a whole. The impact of the existing education systems on rural development and transformation has been only marginal. More often than not, the education systems have proved dysfunctional by inducing the drain of young people from the rural areas to the urban cities in search of desk jobs in the wage-sector for which alone their education had prepared them. But the rate at which wage-sector jobs could be created in the economy fell far short of the output from the top heavy education system. The result was a rising level of unemployment among educated young people. Mostly it meant that the jobs they aspired to were not there, and that they had no preparation for jobs that there were there and needed doing. It could not be otherwise in a view of education which segregated learning from work and work from learning. Learning to be is not enough without learning to do.

The educational landscape in Asia in the closing years of the 60s was a chequered pattern of light and shadows. Much progress was in evidence but so were the deadends. 160 million young people were receiving education, but the number of those outside the educational pale was much larger. The Government were devoting 4 to 6 per cent of GNP to education, but the inequalities in educational outcomes had widened and not narrowed. Girls formed only one fifth of the total enrolment; the differences both in quality and quantity of education between rural and urban were as wide as ever before; and within the same country, there were sharp inequalities from one region to another and from one population group to another.

I believe that in after years the decade of the 70s may well be recalled as a turning point in the educational history of Asia for the critical questions now being raised, for the spirit of self-criticism which manifests itself in policy pronouncements, and for the search for alternatives. The long delayed process of transforming an implanted system into one which authentically responds to the problems, needs and aspirations of the people seems to have begun : not imitation which destroys the spirit of self-reliance but a genuine search for organic growth.

In the last five years most governments in the region have announced significant measures for the reform and reorientation of their education : for example, Iran, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. There are certain common threads that run through these policy pronouncements.

First and foremost is the concern to link education with national development goals. Increasingly, recognition has gained ground, under the pressure of social and political events, that single-minded concentration on GNP growth is not necessarily development. Distributive justice, narrowing down of income disparities and raising the levels of living of the masses are good economics and, at the minimum, good practical politics.

Traditionally education systems are found in close alliance with inequalities and with the perpetuation of privileges. For this role to be transformed into a positive developmental role

calls for quite fundamental reorientations in structure and content. Hence the search for alternatives.

There is in common in the Asian countries a renewed endeavour for mass education. This concern is not only for bringing children to school but to take the school to the children wherever they are. It is recognized that the schools alone cannot do this job. Other channels have to be explored—the community resources and involvement, social organizations other than schools and most important of all the initiative and creative energies of the people themselves.

The cognitive model on which much of the content of education is based does not adequately meet the educational needs in the developing countries. The segregation of pupils from the problems of life and of living also isolates them from the problems of development—problems of poverty, malnutrition, productivity, population growth, misuse of natural resource and of environment. There can be no deep-rooted sense of social responsibility and commitment where there is no encounter with the problems of living in the raw. The bridge between cognitive style of learning and the realm of attitudes and skills is made by genuine work experiences treated as an educational resource. Therefore, many governments in Asia are experimenting with modes of education and work interrelationship in order to link education more closely to the development processes of society.

Another line of search is for alternatives to the institutional set-up of education, notably institutions of higher education and training institutions. The existing institutional arrangements for the training and preparation of teachers, for example, replicates the isolation of academic schools. The role of teacher would need to be redefined if educational institutions become participants in the development process, pupils' learning becomes a function of doing, and social commitment is to be fostered. Long periods of segregated institutionalized training may not have been a fitting response to this need.

I would be overstating the case if I gave the impression that the transformation of the education systems is well underway. But the process has begun in the minds of men. The concerns are too deep and pervasive for this process not to find expression in action of which the beginnings are in evidence.

In trying to transform an education, it is a long and hard haul from a blueprint of intentions to practical realization. But as an Asian saying goes, a thousand mile journey begins with the first step—if the first step points to the right direction.